USS POTOMAC MINI-HISTORY

BY W. ABERNATHY

Atlantic Conference with Winston Churchill –

The Founation for the United Nations - August 1941

Franklin Delano Roosevelt announced plans for a 10-day fishing trip in August of 1941 on the *USS Potomac*, his presidential yacht, off the coast of New England for some relaxation and to escape the Washington heat and humidity. It was expected to be the usual fishing routine on the *Potomac* with the traditional daily betting contests for first, biggest, and most fish.

But on this trip the fish would be spared.

About this same time King George VI of Great Britain signed a letter at Windsor Castle he sent to Prime Minister Winston Churchill approving his plan to leave the United Kingdom during its time of war with Germany to meet in secret with President Roosevelt off the coast of Newfoundland.

The *Potomac* was to play the role as decoy for this first wartime meeting between the two leaders and the plan was plotted by FDR himself.

Great Britain was standing almost alone against Hitler and Nazi Germany. The British had established daylight air superiority over the Germans in the Battle of Britain but Adolf Hitler and Hermann Goring ordered a new policy favoring night operations. London was systemically bombed by the Luftwaffe starting in September 1940 for 56 of the following 57 days and nights. More than 40,000 civilians were killed by the Luftwaffe bombing during the war, almost half of them in the capital, where more than a million homes were destroyed or damaged.

Churchill's principal strategy was simple, engage the Americans. FDR's situation was not so simple. He had won re-election in 1940 with 55% of the popular vote and the electoral votes of thirty-eight states when popular opinion favored isolationism and non-intervention. It was a narrow victory in comparison to the two other Roosevelt elections. The campaign was centered on the issue of America's entry into the war and Roosevelt had promised not to get involved.

Still Roosevelt knew America had to be involved, and he needed to lead the public to that conclusion. He thought it was in our country's interest to come to the aid of Great Britain but he moved

incrementally given the isolationist mood of the country. He arranged for the exchange of more than 50 outdated American destroyers for 99-year leases on British bases in the Caribbean and Newfoundland. One of those bases, the Naval Station Argentia, in Newfoundland would be the venue for his historic secret meeting with Churchill.

In mid-December 1940, FDR introduced a new policy initiative to lend not sell military supplies to Great Britain. Payment would be deferred and could come in any form Roosevelt deemed satisfactory. Congress debated for two months before passing H.R. 1776 in March 1941 officially titled "An Act to Promote the Defense of the United States" better known as the Lend Lease Act. The pretense of any neutrality was ending.

On March 7, 1941, the appropriations bill (H.R. 4050) funding the Lend Lease Act was signed by the president on the *Potomac* while on a real fishing trip off the coast of Florida. The *Potomac's* log reads in part:

> "Present in the cabin of the *POTOMAC* when the President affixed his signature to this most important measure were Attorney General Jackson, Secretary Ickes, Mr. Stephen Early, General Watson, Admiral McIntire and Mr. Harry Hopkins. The President presented to Mr. Hopkins the pen with which he had approved the bill." ($7 billion available to June 30, 1943)

It was a big day for Mr. Hopkins. In addition to receiving the signing pen, his 7.5-pound mackerel took honors as the largest catch of the day and his 6-pound tuna came in next. History does not reveal his winnings.

As Churchill courted Roosevelt, the president wanted better information about Britain including its leadership, morale, and military situation. His former ambassador Joseph P. Kennedy (President John F. Kennedy's father) was considered an appeaser who believed that Britain would lose the war. So, FDR turned to two of his most trusted allies, Averell Harriman and Harry Hopkins.

Harriman was in London coordinating with the British government and Churchill providing constant updates to FDR. An example is from a then confidential telegram he sent to Roosevelt while on the *Potomac* during his March 1941 Florida fishing trip:

> "Everyone and especially Winston Churchill has received me cordially, and am given all information and cooperation. At the moment, the most urgent question is that of shipping and its protection … If you like to sleep with the windows closed, or one ear is deaf, you will enjoy life here…"

The connection that brought the two leaders together was Hopkins who Roosevelt sent to England before their historic meeting in Newfoundland. He arrived with ham, cheese, and cigars for Churchill. Hopkins understood Roosevelt as well as anyone. They had developed the same way of thinking as practical idealists. Churchill was desperate for American support. Roosevelt was aloof, wary and physically distant. Hopkins was to assess the situation with cold and practical eyes. He could influence FDR more than any person. To Churchill, Hopkins was the country's most important visitor in his lifetime.

Churchill recalled that Hopkins came to the garden of 10 Downing Street and said, "the President would like very much to have a meeting with me in some lonely bay or other." Churchill jumped at the

chance. “All was soon arranged” Churchill said after he and Hopkin spoke that night to Roosevelt by telephone. Secrecy was paramount to protect Churchill from Natzi submarines in the North Atlantic and Roosevelt from the isolationists at home.

Hopkins continued to develop a rapport with Churchill to the extent that Churchill and Roosevelt now shared something personal: faith in Hopkins and his judgement. Churchill’s daughter-in -law Pamela said “Hopkins had that extraordinary ability to make WSC feel Hopkins was working for him at the same time he was working for FDR” and could translate “Roosevelt into language that Churchill would understand.” By fits and starts, Roosevelt and Churchill were moving ever closer. Because of Hopkins, Pamela recalled, when Roosevelt and Churchill got together, they were “able to meet as old friends."[1]

At 11 a.m., on Sunday morning, August 3, Roosevelt began his journey by train from Washington’s Union Station to New London, Connecticut, where he boarded his Presidential Yacht *USS Potomac*. It was still light out when he transferred to the yacht and Roosevelt said, “many persons saw me and we stood out of the harbor into the Sound in full view of thousands, my Presidential flag flying from the main top.” He told reporters he would be spending the next few days fishing.

Across the Atlantic, Winston Churchill and his party including Harry Hopkins, were boarding the recently launched and ill-fated battleship *HMS Prince of Wales* for the dangerous journey through German submarine invested waters to Newfoundland. Four months earlier on May 24, 1941 the *HMS Prince of Wales* barely survived a clash with the German Battleship *Bismarc*k[2] in the Denmark Strait to escape back to drydock for repairs. Thirteen of her crew were killed and nine were wounded. Four months after the Atlantic Conference meetings, Japanese bombers sunk the *HMS Prince of Wales* off the coast of Malaysia with the loss of 327 sailors.

FDR was pleased with his plot to use the *Potomac* as the decoy for this meeting with Churchill. Here is how he described it in a letter to his friend and distant cousin, Margaret “Daisey” Suckley:

> “Strange thing happened this morning—suddenly found ourselves transferred with all our baggage & mess crew from the little ‘Potomac’ to the Great Big Cruiser ‘Augusta’[3] and then, the island of Martha’s Vineyard disappeared in the distance, and as we head out into the Atlantic all we can see is our protecting escort, a heavy cruiser and four destroyers. Curiously enough the Potomac still flies my flag & tonight we have been seen by thousands as she passes quietly

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[1] Excerpt from “Franklin and Winston” “by Jon Meacham

[2] In this same battle Germany’s battleship *Bismarck* sunk the *HMS Hood*, then the largest and heaviest battleship in the world, which went down in three minutes with a crew of 1,415. Only three survived. Britain mobilized every warship in the Atlantic to sink the *Bismarck* off the coast of France three days later.

[3] The *USS Augusta* (Georgia not Maine) was a heavy cruiser that served as a flag ship for President Roosevelt and President Truman. She was a headquarters ship for the allied invasion of French North Africa (Operation Torch) with General George S. Patton onboard and the Normandy Invasion (Operation Overlord) with General Omar Bradley onboard.

> through the Cape Cod Canal, guarded on shore by Secret Service and State Troopers while in fact the Pres. will be about 250 miles away."

To his wife, Eleanor, who was at their home in Hyde Park, New York, he maintained the fiction that he was fishing, routing a message through Press Secretary Steve Early:

> "The President sends word all well on boat and getting real rest. Weather excellent…"

Roosevelt thought it was a "delightful story" that while he was safely and secretly 250 miles away in the hands of the U.S. Navy[i] the deception continued. Without Roosevelt onboard the Potomac was routed through Cape Cod Canal with three imposters of Roosevelt, Stephen Early and Gen. Watson dressed in white summer clothes lolling in easy chairs on the quarterdeck waving to the public that lined the banks and bridges

The ploy was working but the press was getting suspicious and noting that key people were missing from Washington. Absent were top U.S top military leaders including Secretary of Navy Frank Knox, Army Chief of Staff Gen. George Marshall and Air Force Chief Gen. H.H. "Hap" Arnold. Also, Churchill and Hopkins had disappeared from London. A suspicion was growing that Roosevelt and Churchill might be secretly meeting somewhere in the North Atlantic. Still the official dispatch from the Potomac read:

> "All members of party showing effects of sunning. Fishing good luck. No destination announced. President being kept in close touch of international situation by navy radio. All on board well and weather excellent."

Meanwhile at 05:30 on 5 August, the *Potomac* came alongside the heavy cruiser USS *Augusta* and moored, the President and his party embarking in the heavy cruiser at 0617. For security purposes, the President's flag remained on the *Potomac* while she, accompanied by *Calypso*, transited the Cape Cod Canal to New England waters.

The *Augusta* accompanied by *USS Tuscaloosa* and their screening destroyers headed for Naval Station Argentia, Newfoundland arriving in the morning of Aug. 7 at Ship Harbour, Placentia Bay, where she anchored to await Churchill's arrival. While waiting, in some validation to the announced purpose of his decoy trip, FDR fished from the *Augusta* and a whale boat but with little success except for one unidentified and "extremely ugly" fish that FDR asked be sent to the Smithsonian Museum.

On August 8, President Roosevelt watched the arrival of *HMS Prince of Wales* with Churchill and Hopkins on board. The Prime Minister and his party[4] boarded the *USS Augusta* at 11 a.m. for meetings including lunch and dinner leaving the ship just before mid-night. The next day, Roosevelt and party visited the *HMS Prince of Wales* for religious services. Meetings were held back and forth until August 12 on the *Augusta* when the two leaders agreed upon the final draft of the eight points of the Atlantic Charter that set forth the vision and principles for the post war world:

- Not to seek territorial gains from the war
- Opposing any territorial gain changes against the wishes of the people concerned
- Supporting the restoration of self-government to countries who lost it during the war
- The right of people to choose their own form of government
- Access for all nations to raw materials needed for economic prosperity

[4] FDR's "party" included his dog Fala who joined with Churchill's poodle, Rufus for below deck meetings.

- Freedom from fear and want
- Freedom of the seas
- Abandonment of the use of force, as well as disarmament of aggressor nations

After the August 12 meeting, President Roosevelt and staff assembled on *Augusta's* quarterdeck at 2:50 p.m. to bid Prime Minister Churchill and his staff farewell. With the ship's guard and band paraded, the parting ended with the playing of "*God Save the King"* A little over two hours later, the *Prince of* Wales passed close aboard and rendered passing honors to the *Augusta*, after which the band struck up "*Auld Lang Syne*."

After the departure of *HMS Prince of Wales*, the *Augusta* got underway in company with *Tuscaloosa* and their screening destroyers enroute to Blue Hill Bay, Maine, to a return rendezvous with the *Potomac* and *Calypso*.

Back on the *USS Potomac* at an August 16 press conference in Rockford, Maine, Roosevelt sent conflicting signals about the significance of his meeting with Churchill. Isolationism was still a major mood of the country. While the two men were at sea, the House of Representatives had approved the extension of the military draft by only a single vote. For the "boys" of the press, Roosevelt emphasized "I think the first thing in the minds of all of us was a very remarkable religious service on the quarter deck of the *Prince of Wales* last Sunday morning …. It was one of the great historic services." He said they had discussed what is happening to the world under the Nazi regime that needs to be brought home to all the Democracies. When asked if they had discussed how to actually implement the provisions of the Atlantic Charter, he replied, "interchange of views, that's all. Nothing else." To the reporter who asked if America was closer to war. Roosevelt replied "I should say, no"

The Japanese answered differently on Dec. 7, 1941 and Hitler settled the question four days later when he declared war on the United States.

On January 1, 1942, Twenty-six allied governments signed a "Declaration of United Nations" pledging their support for the Atlantic Charter principles which became the basis for the modern-day United Nations.

History does not reveal that any fish were caught during the secret rendezvous of the two wartime leaders in Newfoundland[5]

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[i] Fate of the three ships boarded by President Franklin Roosevelt for the Atlantic Conference:

- British Battleship *HMS Prince of Wales* was sunk by Japanese bombers on Dec. 10, 1941 while returning to Singapore with the loss of 327 sailors. The wreck is nearly upside down on the bottom off Kuantan, Malaysia 3° 33' 36" north – 104° 28' 42" east. The site has been designated as a 'Protected Place' under the British Protection of Military Remains Act 1986.
- Heavy American Cruiser *USS Augusta* was stricken from the Naval Vessel Register on Mary 1, 1959. She was sold for scrap on Nov. 9, 1959 to Robert Benjamin of Panama City.
- *USS Potomac* has been fully restored to its condition as the presidential yacht operating since 1995 on San Francisco Bay as a National Historic Landmark and memorial to Franklin Delano Roosevelt by the Association for the Preservation of the Presidential Yacht *Potomac*, a 501-c-3 non-profit corporation. The Association has educational programs to bring to life for later generations the challenges overcome during one of the most tumultuous times in American history.

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[5] However, the fishermen of Chebogue, Nova Scotia, claimed the *Potomac* had wreaked havoc to their herring nets and announced they were considering sending a bill to the White House. No record that it was sent, received or paid.